INFORMS CHAPTERS & FORUMS

Community Best Practices Guide

What our strongest chapters and forums did in 2025–26, and how to copy it

Prepared by INFORMS Community Relations • 2026 Edition • Drawn from 23 community activity reports

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Every practice in this guide appears in a real 2026 activity report submitted by an INFORMS chapter or forum. Nothing here is theoretical.

The results are real too. One chapter grew membership more than 60% in eight months. Another grew 23% year over year, and a third nearly 17%. One ran a sold-out regional conference with more than 150 attendees. A single webinar drew 73 people.

Welcome

Congratulations on stepping into a leadership role with an INFORMS community. Whether you lead a geographic chapter or a forum, the mechanics of a healthy community are remarkably similar: a team that transfers knowledge deliberately, a predictable calendar, more than one way to reach people, and at least one thing you do that nobody else does.

This guide distills what worked across our communities this year. Read it before your annual planning session, not after.

The short version

If you only implement four things, implement these. They separated the highest-scoring communities from the rest almost perfectly:

Practice	Why it mattered
A structured leadership handover	Every top-scoring community described a documented transition. Every struggling one described an informal or absent handover.
A predictable event cadence	One content event plus one social per quarter. Communities with rhythm held attendance; communities with bursts lost it.
More than one communication channel	No successful community relied on a single channel. Every low-activity community did.
One signature event	A conference, a monthly seminar, or an annual meeting. It anchors the calendar, attracts sponsors, and gives the community an identity.

What Successful Communities Have in Common

1. They make leadership transitions structured, not accidental

The strongest communities never rely on memory or a single person. When officers change, knowledge changes hands deliberately.

- Maintain a shared drive holding prior reports, event-planning templates, checklists, contact lists, and a running document of every platform and resource needed to operate.
- Hold one-on-one transition meetings between each outgoing and incoming officer, with follow-up check-ins during the handover period.
- Keep a "knowledge book" or officer handbook so incoming officers can learn their roles, timelines, and responsibilities quickly.
- Consider a natural rotation path (Secretary to Vice President to President) so leaders build experience before taking the top role.
- Store checklists, templates, and forms centrally so continuity survives turnover rather than depending on individuals.

Communities that skipped this step reported struggling to maintain consistent programming, and asked INFORMS for exactly the resources listed above. Build them from day one.

2. They build a leadership pipeline before they need one

Two of the strongest chapters credit an advisory board or advisory committee as central to their momentum.

- Recruit an extended advisory group (one chapter used eight people) mixing former officers, event sponsors, and members interested in future board roles.
- Let volunteers help plan in a limited way first, then step into officer roles once they are engaged. This was the most reliable pipeline reported.
- Include past presidents and senior members to preserve institutional knowledge and provide mentorship.
- Interview volunteers rather than accepting anyone. One chapter credits a short conversation about work culture and commitment with producing five driven new team members.
- Consider a leadership-only social event. One chapter hosted an invitation-only gathering for past presidents, current officers, and track chairs specifically to transfer knowledge and cultivate successors.

3. They meet regularly as a board

High-performing communities held frequent officer and business meetings, with several reporting 20 to 40 per year, often bi-weekly. Forums with the most activity reported 16 meetings a year.

- Hold a December or year-start planning session that sets the full calendar in one sitting, involving both officers and advisors.
- Use Zoom or Teams to keep geographically dispersed officers in sync and decisions timely.
- **The correlation is stark:** communities reporting zero or one business meeting also reported zero or one event.

4. They run a consistent, varied event calendar

- A simple, sustainable cadence: one content event (keynote, panel, or workshop) and one social event (e.g., happy hour) per quarter.

- Vary the format: speaker presentations, hands-on workshops, panel discussions, webinars, speed-networking, and themed socials all appeared in top reports.
- Webinars extend reach cheaply. One chapter's single webinar drew 73 attendees from across the INFORMS community; another runs a monthly online seminar averaging 50 participants and treats it as its signature offering.
- For geographically spread regions, rotate venues across the area and hold events at universities. Two chapters named traffic and distance as their single biggest attendance obstacle and solved it by moving locations.
- Themed socials give people a reason to show up. One chapter ran Pi Day and Square Root Day happy hours and a pickleball social timed to a nearby conference.

5. They host a signature or flagship event

Nearly every top community had one marquee event that anchored its year and identity.

- Regional analytics conferences drew 80 to 150+ attendees, attracted sponsors, and generated momentum, visibility, and new members.
- A recurring monthly seminar series or an annual meeting works equally well as an anchor. It does not have to be big, it has to be reliable.
- Flagship events create sponsorship opportunities. Chapters that involved sponsors in planning and content reported deeper sponsor commitment and access to sponsors' networks.
- Time events to piggyback on larger gatherings. Several forums hold their signature social or panel at the INFORMS Annual Meeting or Analytics+ where the audience is already assembled.

6. They treat every event as a recruiting opportunity

- Display membership QR codes and links prominently at every event and include membership information in presentations.
- Welcome non-members, then invite them to join. Conversion from attendee to member was the most-cited recruitment path across all reports.
- Make a membership announcement at the start of each meeting. One chapter does nothing more than this and names it as their retention strategy.
- Encourage attendees to bring colleagues and peers to the next event.
- Invite new members into visible roles. One chapter invites them to serve as conference session chairs, which converts attendance into ownership.
- Use post-event surveys to demonstrate value and keep new audiences engaged.

7. They engage students and universities deliberately

- Partner with local student chapters and co-sponsor events with them.
- Add faculty representatives from area universities to your board or advisory group. One chapter added faculty from four local schools and gained access to their student networks, campus flyer boards, and word-of-mouth.
- Run student competitions with modest cash prizes ($500–$1,000). One chapter's competition drew 25 submissions from across the country.
- Solve a real student problem. One chapter's career clinic for international students addressed a need nobody else was meeting.
- Host events on campus. It lowers cost, eases logistics, and drives student attendance. Student members were the fastest-growing segment for the fastest-growing chapter.

- Reach further down the pipeline where you can. One chapter's members visit elementary and junior high schools to teach computational thinking and run STEM camps introducing high schoolers to OR.

8. They communicate on multiple channels

No successful community relied on a single channel. The common stack:

- A LinkedIn group or page (the most consistently cited channel) plus an email distribution list.
- INFORMS Connect for announcements, plus a community website kept up to date.
- Platforms like Meetup for event discovery, and Instagram, Facebook, or X where audiences warrant.
- A predictable communication sequence around every event: save-the-date, call for participation, reminders, and a post-event thank-you with key takeaways.
- Officer amplification: board members sharing events within their own professional networks was named repeatedly as a low-cost multiplier.

9. They partner beyond their own community

- Collaborate with other data science and analytics associations in your region.
- Co-host with industry partners and vendors. Sponsored hands-on workshops were among the best-attended events reported.
- Coordinate with other INFORMS communities to cross-promote open webinars and share speakers. Several communities want this and are not finding each other, so ask staff to connect you.
- Run joint events across chapters and forums. One chapter and one forum co-hosted successfully this year, reaching both memberships at once.
- Serve as a patron or sponsor for existing regional conferences rather than building everything yourself.

10. They listen and adapt

- Run post-event and post-conference surveys, and let results shape scheduling, programming, and structure.
- Experiment with locations, formats, and times. One chapter credited exactly this experimentation for an uptick in attendance.
- Recognize members through awards ceremonies and prizes. Recognition drives engagement and retention.
- Staff an information table at your own large events so members and prospects have somewhere to ask questions.

Notes for Forums and Interest Groups

Forums face a different problem than chapters. Geography is not the constraint; visibility is. Nearly every forum named the same challenge: members of INFORMS do not know the forum exists.

What is working

- Anchor to the calendar of larger events. Forums consistently report their best-attended activities are those held at the INFORMS Annual Meeting or Analytics+, where the audience is already gathered.

- Own an award or competition. Forums with established awards (early career awards, paper competitions, student poster competitions, teaching awards) have a recurring reason to communicate and a way to surface members' work.
- Run a seasonal webinar and make it official. One forum formalized its summer webinar as a standing award, converting an ad hoc event into a repeating institution.
- Build a mentoring program. A structured mentoring initiative gives members a reason to stay connected between annual meetings.
- Mark milestones. One forum's 25th anniversary gala at the Annual Meeting was its highest-visibility event of the year.
- Connect internationally and cross-organizationally with peer groups doing similar work.

The recurring forum challenges, and what to do about them

Challenge	Practical response
Members do not know the forum exists	Ask INFORMS Community Relations for a newsletter feature or communication spotlight. Request presence at the Annual Meeting. Make sure your Connect microsite is current.
Engagement drops between annual meetings	Add one predictable touchpoint per quarter: a webinar, a newsletter, or an online networking event. Predictability matters more than scale.
Fundraising and sponsorship	Approach vendors already active in your space for single-event sponsorship. Ask staff how peer forums sustain themselves; several are asking the same question.
Industry members feel less served than academics	Hold at least one event at a practitioner-facing conference rather than only at the Annual Meeting.
Thin participation in elections and roles	Use the same pipeline chapters use: a low-commitment volunteer role first, an officer role second.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Reports from communities that struggled point to a few recurring traps. None of them are about talent or effort.

Going dormant. Communities that held few or no events saw flat or declining membership, and found restarting harder than maintaining momentum would have been. Activity compounds in both directions.

Depending on one person. A community stalls when a single dynamic officer leaves. Two communities named exactly this as their reason for rebuilding. Distribute knowledge and responsibility while things are going well.

No documented handover. Communities without structured transitions reported difficulty operating and asked for handbooks and templates after the fact.

Single-channel communication. Relying on one platform limits reach. Potential members simply never hear about events.

Inconsistent scheduling. Irregular events erode attendance habits. A lighter but predictable calendar beats an ambitious, erratic one.

Not tracking your own numbers. Several communities could not report membership change or attendance figures. The work happened; the evidence did not. This costs you on the Community Excellence Award and, more importantly, costs you the ability to see what is working.

Waiting until December to think about the report. The activity report is a log, not an essay. Communities that fill it in as they go report it takes under an hour.

> **A NOTE ON HARD YEARS**
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> Several communities this year were rebuilding after losing officers, funding, or a member base affected by external circumstances beyond their control.
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> The pattern in the reports is encouraging: communities that named a modest, specific plan, whether one webinar series, one revived social, or one partnership, recovered. Communities that waited for conditions to improve did not. Small and consistent beats ambitious and postponed.

Your First 90 Days: Quick-Start Checklist

A fuller version of this checklist, with role-by-role detail, appears in the New Community Officer Quick-Start Guide.

- ❑ Set up a shared drive and start a running operations document (platforms, logins, contacts, templates).
- ❑ Hold transition meetings with outgoing officers and collect all institutional knowledge.
- ❑ Schedule recurring board meetings and hold a planning session to set the year's calendar.
- ❑ Commit to a sustainable event cadence of one content event and one social per quarter.
- ❑ Establish your communication channels: LinkedIn, email list, INFORMS Connect, and website.
- ❑ Reach out to local student chapters and university faculty about partnership.
- ❑ Identify two or three potential sponsors or industry partners for the year.
- ❑ Recruit an advisory group of past leaders, sponsors, and prospective future officers.
- ❑ Plan one signature event. Even a modest one anchors your calendar.
- ❑ Add membership QR codes and a recruiting moment to every event you run.
- ❑ Start your activity log now: date, event, attendance, partners, sponsors.
- ❑ Complete your Volunteer Acknowledgments and confirm your bylaws are current.

> **WE CAN HELP**
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> Marketing support, event pages and Zoom setup, speaker connections, introductions to other communities, governance and financial guidance are all available, and all easier with a few weeks' notice.
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